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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to elicit the responses of five college students to their involvement with a single poem over a period of three weeks to determine if such involvement led to a greater appreciation and understanding of the poem. Each student began with a silent reading of the poem, moved to a study of it based only on silent readings, then progressed through a series of private and semipublic oral readings of the work. The students responded after each reading or performance, stating each time their understanding of or involvement with the poem. Ten responses were written or elicited through interviews. The data were divided into six categories of concerns: meanings, conflicts, emotions, structural and stylistic elements, real life connections, and performance as public event. The findings showed that (1) through performance of the poem, students showed a progressively intense concern with meanings and levels of meaning; (2) conflicts central to the poem crystallized for the students after they had performed the text; (3) while student responses to silent readings and study of the poem were primarily concerned with meaning, responses after oral readings were concerned with emotions; (4) students had increased concern with structural and stylistic elements after oral readings; (5) once performing the poem, students showed increasing desire to personalize the work; and (6) some students expressed frustration after public performances with having lost their focus on the poem while concentrating on audience response. (Materials used in the study are appended.) (FL)

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Research Findings from Student Performances of James Dickey's "The Leap"

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Abstract

Many theories of oral interpretation support the premise that through performance individuals can gain fuller understanding and appreciation of literary texts. The following is the account of an exploratory study to determine some of the discoveries unique to performance involvement with literature. Specifically, it is the report of discoveries made by five individuals through their involvement with a single poem over a period of three weeks.

Introduction

Proponents of oral interpretation typically argue that through performance we can acquire a fuller appreciation and understanding of literature. Scholars have described this phenomenon in a variety of ways. Don Geiger has contended that performers come to "realize" or know things, with more depth than silent readers, about the experiences, thoughts, emotions of a text.[1] William Craig Forrest asserts that the performance of literature creates "the direct kinesthetic sensation of our speaking bodies" (how the speech sounds and feels to the body), a vital sensation of language experience.[2] Wallace A. Bacon maintains that oral interpretation demonstrates not just what a poem says, but also how it feels, and that "in performance, with the matching of the body of the poem with the body of the reader, we have the poem incarnate."[3] And Arnold Berleant, philosopher and aesthetician, says that "Performance is the creation of an experience. In participating in that experience, we become one with the work."[4]

How can we gauge, though, just what performers of literature come to know and sense and feel as a result of their involvement with texts? Traditionally we have looked to audience response: laughter and applause, critical reviews, teacher and peer evaluations. Beverly Whitaker Long has suggested another type of gauge: "measurement aimed at discovering more about the interpreter's response."[5] Rosanna Taylor Herndon not only supports this type of research but has suggested that the lack of it has created the misconception that oral interpretation is "an inexplicable mystical experience culminating in

artistic expression...The uncertainty about what is referred to when interpreters use the phrase, 'the reader experiences the literature,' prevents one from asking pertinent questions and setting relevant problems for research. This phrase and other similar phrases suggest vague and mystical concepts, and they deserve the skeptical treatment they usually get from scholars in more factual fields."[6] We need, of course, the work of Geiger, Forrest, Bacon, Berleant and many others as our theoretical foundation, but as Herndon suggests, we need to explore, as well, through interpreter response, what specific things performers come to know and feel and realize. Jane Tompkins has suggested, then, that the argument for oral interpretation can begin "by enumerating the kinds of values that the performance of literature characteristically brings to light."[7]

Herndon's 1973 study is an initial step toward that goal. She catalogues the kinds of responses made by students after their first oral readings of a number of new poems.[8] Mary Frances HopKins and Lee Hudson report discoveries made by performers over time from involvement with specific texts. Through her own performance of Tillie Olsen's short story "I Stand Here Ironing," HopKins reports that the performer "even sooner than the critic realizes the poetry of the language" because it is the performer who must convincingly deliver poetic, elevated lines from the conversational situation of the story. The performer also becomes quickly and acutely aware of the shifts and blends of time, discourse, and literary modes within the piece; motives of the speaker; ambiguity in certain lines; and building and movement of the story because s/he has to "get there" in performance.[9]

Through group performance involvement with the poetry of May Swenson, reports Hudson, director and actors discovered: lack of activity in the poems; the many ways in which speakers (as observers and spectators) are engaged in perceptual activity; progression of a complex pun system dealing with words and sounds; lack of people as subjects; social and sexual substructures of poems; humor; androgynous qualities of speakers; ambiguity of tone; and metaphysical questions within casual, often humorous language.[10]

These are just the beginnings. At the 1980 SCA Convention program of research priorities in Interpretation, Long called for more of this type of research. In the same program, Hudson echoed this call for articles "that focus on issues that emerge screamingly from texts."[11] Through interpreter response, reported by performers, directors, and detached researchers, we might begin to identify discoveries common to nearly all performances and those unique to genres, narrative modes, performance situations, and individual texts. Such information might further substantiate our theoretical base and aid us as teachers in guiding our students to yet richer performance involvement with literature.

Design and Methodology

This study was designed to elicit the responses of five participants to their involvement with a single poem over a period of three weeks. The goal was to determine what discoveries, if any, were made by the participants specifically as a result of their performance involvement with the text. Each participant

began with an impromptu silent reading of the poem, moved to a study of it based solely on silent readings, then progressed through a series of private and semi-public oral readings of the piece (Appendix A). Participants (university undergraduates enrolled in a beginning interpretation course) responded after each reading or performance, stating each time their current understanding of or involvement with the poem. A total of ten responses were written or elicited orally through non-directive interviews (Appendix B).

James Dickey's "The Leap" was selected as the poem for study because: it concerns the provocative themes of childhood memory, innocence-and-experience, and suicide; it utilizes the first person speaker and might, therefore, inspire more personal responses; it moves sharply from interior to dramatic monologue, with the speaker finally addressing the subject directly; and it uses language sophisticated enough to inspire in-depth discussion (Appendix C).

After all written responses and interview notes were collected and examined, the data was divided into episodes, each representing "a complete thought expressed by a subject."[12] Episodes fell into six major categories of concerns: meanings, conflicts, emotions, structural and stylistic elements, real-life connections or symbolic role-taking, and performance as public event. Episodes were then examined to determine if any course, or progression, had emerged from the series of responses by any given individual; secondly, to identify any correlations among these progressions of the participants.

Next, episodes were studied within categories to identify any correlations across participants in the various kinds of responses made. Furthermore, numbers of episodes within categories were noted and studied for any significance, and an examination was made regarding when (during which of the ten participant responses) certain kinds of observations were reported.

Research Findings

(1) Through performance of "The Leap," participants showed a progressively intense concern with meanings and levels of meaning. The performers grew increasingly frustrated with lines whose meanings eluded them, soon made discoveries about these lines, and eventually felt confident in possessing some understanding of nearly all lines of the poem. Through repeatedly speaking the poem aloud, performers also became more attuned to significance of word choice, double meanings, and recurrence of certain words in the text.

(Sample quotes: "I hate the last line still. It doesn't fit. I hate it intensely cuz I have to say it and it's a reflection on me that I don't get it. I don't know what to do--it's a helpless feeling. I would not hate it so much if it were a silent reading. For a paper, I'd pretend I understood it and go on. It bothers me that I don't <u>really</u> know what I mean when I'm saying it--I don't like saying or reading aloud things I don't understand cuz it becomes obvious to a listener." "I think writers <u>hear</u> the words coming out of mouths and hear with them all the emotion. I think to understand a poem as the writer did, you have to hear it (in your mind, at least, if not performed)." "Certain words

need to be grasped by the audience; they're important. When you pronounce these words, and repeat them, you become conscious of them. They become whole, take form.")

(2) Conflicts central to the poem crystallized for the participants after they performed the text. Some students saw these conflicts, or underlying tensions, as the poem's real foundation; they further reported how imagery and word placement supported these conflicts. (Sample quote: "I see continuing contrasts in the poem: male vs. female, adventure vs. banality, etc.")

(3) Student responses to silent readings and study of the poem had been concerned primarily with meaning. After oral readings, however, comments regarding emotions in the poem grew markedly more frequent. Emotions in specific passages were identified and discussed, and attention was paid to shifts of emotion from line to line, stanza to stanza. (Sample quote: "I sensed a lot more of a despairing tone than I did when reading silently.")

(4) Increased concern with structural and stylistic elements was also reported by participants after oral readings. Students grew conscious of time, rhythm and voice and showed a new awareness of stanza and line breaks within the poem. Some of these breaks were initially labelled awkward and confusing but were reidentified after subsequent performances and supported with explication; various cases of words placed at beginnings and ends of lines, for example, were cited as reinforcement of thematic concerns. (Sample quote: "Even in preparation for my

first actual performance for an audience, I became aware of words and stanza breaks and how they show changes and complete thoughts. Even in preparation, things happen. For example, why is there a break here, rather than in even sentences?")

(5) Once performing the text, students showed increasing desire to personalize its subject matter. Three of the five participants cited women in their lives whose situation somehow paralleled that of Jane MacNaughton Hill, the subject of the poem. Two of these three each had a female friend who had died fairly recently, and each described how s/he as performer focused on the deceased friend before performing to make the poem more real. Another student described his use of a newspaper photograph of a woman for precisely the same reason. The participants also wanted to personalize the poem's language. They reported greater comfort with the words of the text and with making them "my words." (Sample quotes: "When I discuss the paper rings in the gym, I now actually see the gym. Actually, I see a gym in Pennsylvania. This makes the whole thing more real for me." "The poem is becoming a part of me, and I start to think about this girl I knew who died this past year in a car accident. She was a dancer. I find it very easy to relate with the poet in his wanting to have things remain the same.")

(6) After the first and second performances with any audience members, some students expressed frustration with having lost their focus on the poem while concentrating, during performance, on audience response. However, these concerns were cited fewer

times after later performances as students apparently became more personally involved with the text and more accustomed to performing it. Despite that obvious personal involvement, some of the students felt that perhaps their most intense performances of the poem might still happen in private--with no one viewing at all.

Some final miscellaneous quotes of interest: "Performance of the poem have really helped me, as they always do with things I read. Silent readings cause me to daydream. I have to read it aloud--more comes out then." "It's for an audience. I'm setting it in an environment. I can't leave it as fast. This assures more effective and intense involvement in the poem." "The poem, this time, has a voice. It seems more real and human to me."

Conclusion

Some of the findings from this study substantiate the thrust of current oral interpretation theory that performance can enhance a student's understanding and appreciation of a literary text. All five students involved reported after performance that they could not simply ignore lines and phrases with seemingly cryptic messages; because they had the task of speaking those lines and trying to do so convincingly, they struggled to find meanings, became frustrated when they couldn't, and felt some success when they finally did. One performer made discoveries in a very different manner: though often unclear about meanings in the poem, she found that every time she said the words aloud to her audience, even if just one person, she

would emphasize certain words without understanding why. Then, when she thought through the poem after performance, al kinds of realizations came to mind. Furthermore, without lectures or discussions, the participants here learned out of need about structures of the poem and their significance. Again, the performers posed questions until they had answers.

Some of the findings in this study are certainly not new discoveries for oral interpretation. Much of their value, though, lies in their support and validation of many of the theories in the field. One of the most striking discoveries was how suddenly and deeply the students became aware, through performance, of the emotional contours within the text, supporting solidly Bacon's claim that "interpretation serves the felt need of poems."[13] Also worthy of restatement is the students' desire to make the language of the poem feel like their own. One student stated: "I'm able to almost ignore the words and think about expressing thoughts." She effectively supports Berleant's earlier stated claim that through performing literature, "we become one with the work."

Two themes lie beneath much of the student response in this study: quickness and commitment. Though the students might have reached some of the same discoveries from only silent readings and study, it is doubtful that they would have reached the various conclusions as quickly or as fully as they did. One student's comment, though particularly eloquent, was not unlike a point made repeatedly by the participants: "Performance assures a higher concentration on the part of the performer--more of a commitment to the poem than there would have been without performance.

You can't stray to other thoughts as easily--you work more closely to the words." Another participant drew an analogy to playing music; he explained that while playing a song on the piano, one feels compelled to see it through to its rightful end. Perhaps it is this active involvement, this commitment of the oral interpreter, that seems to inspire so many new discoveries so quickly about a text in performance.

Appendix A

Participant Involvement

#	Type of reading/ performance	Type of response
1	One silent reading	Written
2	Silent study	Written
3	First oral reading (in private)	Written
4	Final private rehearsal preceding first public performance	Written
5	First public performance	Written
6	Second performance	Written
7	Third performance	Individual Interview with Researcher
8	Final performance	Individual Interview with Researcher
9	No performance	Summary Interview with Researcher Regarding Total Experience
10	No performance	Group Discussion Among Participants Guided by Researcher

Appendix B

Instructions to Participants:

About your responses:

a) Please be completely honest.

b) Keep your responses on sheets of notebook paper labelled according to instructions below.

c) Your responses may be spontaneous or they may be the accumulation of much thought.

d) You may record your responses in complete sentences or in sentence fragments.

Instructions:

1) Read "The Leap" by James Dickey once silently, and on a sheet of paper labelled "First Response," write your initial reactions to the poem.

2) Now read the poem two or three more times silently and study it carefully. Then on a sheet of paper labelled "Second Response," write your reactions to the poem now that you have spent more time with it. Please include somewhere in this response a statement of your "understanding" of the poem at this point.

3) Now read the poem aloud once or twice and on a sheet of paper labelled "Third Response," write your reactions to the poem after these first oral readings.

4) Now start learning the poem for purposes of performance. Please be prepared to perform it in a private conference. After your final rehearsal of the poem before meeting

to perform it, please write your newest response to the poem on a sheet of paper labelled "Fourth Response."

5) After first performance of the poem in conference, record new reactions, if any, to the poem on paper labelled "Fifth Response."

6) Perform the poem "publicly" a second time. Record responses ("Sixth Response").

(Responses 7-10 will be oral.)

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Notes

[1]Don Geiger, "Poetic Realizing as Knowing," QJS LIX (1973), p. 311.

[2]William Craig Forrest, "Literature as Aesthetic Object; The Kinesthetic Stratum," Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism (1970), p. 456.

[3]Wallace A. Bacon, "The Act of Interpretation," Oral English, No. 2 (1972), p. 6.

[4]Arnold Berleant, "Performance as Knowing: Cognitive and Non-Cognitive Dimensions," Pre-Convention Conference on Interpretation, SCA Convention, New York City, 12 Nov. 1980.

[5]Beverly Whitaker Long, "Research Directions in the Performance of Literature," Speech Monographs, Vol. 40 (August 1973), p. 240.

[6]Rosanna Taylor Herndon, "A Symbolic Interactionist Theory of Reader-Poetry Encounter: A Process Description of the Reader's Interaction with New Poetry," Diss. Southern Illinois University 1973.

[7]Jane Tompkins, "The Performance of Literature and Reader-Response Criticism," Pre-Convention Conference on Interpretation, SCA Convention, New York City, 12 Nov. 1980.

[8]Herndon.

[9]Mary Frances HopKins, "Toward an Approach to a Structure for Reporting Research Findings of Solo Performance: Tillie Olsen's 'I Stand Here Ironing,'" Program on Research in Interpretation, SCA Convention, New York City, 15 Nov. 1980.

[10]Lee Hudson, "Toward an Approach to a Structure for Reporting Research Findings Through Group Performance: The Poetry of May Swenson," Program on Research in Interpretation, SCA Convention, New York City, 15 Nov. 1980.

[11]Hudson.

[12]Vicky Gordon Martin, Unpublished Manuscript.

[13]Bacon.